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Through a Discourse Analysis lens less darkly: Illuminating how SME principals and support agency practitioners see marketing in SMEs

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explain the social constructivist approach taken to uncovering clearer, deeper meaning through a recent qualitative, interpretive and subjective research study. This study examined the ways in which marketing is seen and conducted in SMEs by SME principals and support agency practitioners. The research was designed with a particular method of data analysis (Discourse Analysis) in mind which was applied to the SME marketing context. The findings of the study provided a contribution to the SME marketing debate where the research approach taken proved to be instrumental in providing a contribution to both theory and practice of marketing in SMEs and the education, training and development activities of support agencies. The subjective nature of this research yielded benefits that would not have been available through a positivist research approach. The approach taken has more practical application than some traditionalists might believe. This paper explains how further understanding of SME marketing resulted from the study and how further original insights can be gained by applying the tools utilised in studies in SME marketing and marketing in other contexts.

Key Word(s): SME Marketing; Qualitative, Interpretive, Subjective Research; Discourse Analysis; Discursive Practices.

Biography

Dr Paul Copley is Senior Lecturer in Marketing at the Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University, England where he is Programme Leader for the Masters in Marketing programmes. Currently External Examiner in Marketing with a number of Universities at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, he holds honours degrees at undergraduate level and at masters level (Marketing, Lancaster University, and Business Education, Newcastle University) and a PhD (Marketing in SMEs, Northumbria University, examined by professors from both Stirling and Ulster Universities). Before joining the Marketing Division of Newcastle Business School where he currently specializes in teaching Marketing Communications and Marketing Research Applications, Paul spent a number of years advising actual and potential micro businesses and SMEs across the range of marketing activities. This included running short course/training programmes and consulting for a wide range of large and small organizations. Before that Paul held several management posts in marketing in several multinational companies. The 2nd edition of Paul's book on Marketing Communications Management will be published by Sage in 2011. Paul is a keen researcher and a regular contributor to the Academy of Marketing (and a prize winner) and to other conferences.

Introduction

Much SME research focuses upon orthodox and relational marketing. Recently, it has also been argued that the literature fails to pay adequate attention to the role that critical perspectives and studies might take in helping to understand SME and entrepreneurial marketing (Fillis, 2007). Moreover, qualitative approaches to researching SME and entrepreneurial marketing have recently gained favour, although it has been noted that qualitative does not necessarily mean interpretive or subjective (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009:27). These authors suggest that there is 'an institutionalised preoccupation with quantitative studies' in the entrepreneurship literature. Indeed, there have been calls for more imaginative and creative approaches to the research process that can lead to non-rational ways of knowing and contributions to theoretical developments in marketing generally (Brownlie et al, 1999, Burton, 2001, 2005, Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008, Maclaran, Saren, Stern and Tadajewski, 2009), in part because of the perceived failure of quantitative techniques to achieve this. Such quantitative approaches often involve replication of previous, positivistic studies and this has opened the door to new ways of seeing through, for example, critical thinking and perspectives that go beyond objectivist, rationalist or functionalist paradigms towards more relativist, implicit and subjectivist ones where banter, small talk and conversation take centre stage.

There is 'growing influence of epistemological positions within various forms of social constructivism' (Halkier, 2010:72) where 'all knowledge is seen as dependent on the social context of its production'. This paper has emerged from a study that employed a social constructivist and qualitative approach to researching SME marketing while at the same time exploring implications for education, training and development. This was a study of social processes and the reasons behind human behaviour and therefore was more than just about 'the what' as it sought deeper understanding of processes, attitudes and motives. The subject had no definite form until the study provided one. In the study my interpretation of data was key, where the instrument used for collecting data, the semi-structured interview (with guide) changed/mutated within the course of the study, depending on interim results.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse Analysis is generally understood to be the examination of language (for example spoken, signed or written) through, for example, patterns of pronunciation, choice of words or sentence structure. Discourse constitutes sequences of repeatable relations to objects, subjects and other (stated) things that affect our views and therefore discourse delivers vocabulary, expressions and style (Foucault, 1972). Over the last half century Discourse Analysis has been growing in use but only relatively recently in management and marketing. Discourse Analysis has been used now in a wide range of studies. Elliot (1996) points out the potential in the social rather than linguistic organisation of language and the use of Discourse Analysis in psychology and consumer research where a wide range of possible applications in marketing exist, but warns of difficulties in practice and validation. Other examples are social welfare and teen motherhood (Lessa, 2006) and the disciplinary power of management coaching and the difference between employee and executive coaching (Nielsen and Norreklit, 2009). As Bucholtz (2001) suggests, Discourse Analysis has been used in anthropology where it has become popular because of the ability to yield

insights into culture and power. A form of Discourse Analysis was employed in the study to analyse responses to questions posed to a participant that form a repertoire consisting of descriptive and referential terms that portray beliefs, actions and events (Mavin, 2001) and these are interpretive repertoires that are accounts that are evidence of underlying processes (Potter and Wetherall, 1987) where Discourse Analysis can be used to interpret social data (Banister et al, 1994).

Reflexivity

The kind of analysis of qualitative research texts used in the study, concerned as it is with the social organisation of texts and with variability of accounts and interpretive repertoires, requires reflexivity (Johnson and Duberley, 2003). The literature generally underlines the importance of reflexivity. For example reflexivity offers insights into interplay of structure and agency in human behaviour (Fries, 2009). Finlay (2002) suggests the researcher engages in explicit self-awareness of their own role and need to evaluate this through reflexivity. Cunliffe (2004) suggests that reflective practice embraces subjective understanding of reality and how we constitute our realities and identities in relational ways. Other studies focus not on the researcher's reflexivity but on the reflexivity of the researched. For example, in Akegaard and Langer's (2002) study cosmetic surgery is understood as part of the individual's reflexive construction of self-identity i.e. self-esteem and body and identity relationships. Goulding and Saren (2010) argue that systematic methodology using grounded theory and reflexivity can gain insights into consumer experiences (involving Goths as an aesthetic subculture). Beckett and Nayak (2008) use Foucault's concept of governmentality where the consumer is transformed from sovereign consumer to active collaborator i.e. reflexive consumers. Reflexivity requires the researcher to be aware of the contribution (in terms of influence and informing) to the construction of meaning within the research, whether this be in a personal way through values or beliefs or in an epistemological way through the research design or method of analysis.

Aim of this paper

The study provided a contribution to the discussion around the nature of SME marketing by suggesting that social constructivist perspective implies the importance of the inclusion of critical marketing perspectives (as well as orthodox and relational marketing perspectives) in this context. This paper aims to provide an insight into methodological diversity through the study that involved the collection of data using a social constructivist approach and the application of Discourse Analysis to qualitative data collected. The paper aims to show the successful use of the approach taken in the study by highlighting the contribution of the study to the understanding of the nature of SME marketing through the addition of a new, critical perspective that is contextually embedded.

Research Methodology

Nature

The methodology developed was interpretivist (Fisher 2004) and the creation and

analysis of particular socially constructed arenas was central to a study concerned, as it was, with everyday life in a particular context. Part of the study's goal was to understand the multiplicity of meaning in such a context (Elliot, 1996). The data collection method used was the semi-structured interview and the method of analysis chosen was Discourse Analysis. A discourse is a concept(s) through which meaning is provided and is produced through an identifiable set of practices, for example marketing through networking. Realities are shaped by discursive practices and interactions (Grant, Keenoy and Oswick, 1998), discourses framing the sense of 'that which we are' (Mumby and Chair, 1997:181). The use of a Discourse Analysis lens fits with the desired social research inquiry.

The social constructivist approach

The social constructivist approach involves the researcher as a subjective individual making sense of particular social arenas rather than the positivist view that the obsession with talk is an intellectual luxury (Grant, Keenoy and Oswick, 2001) or that the 'functionalist paradigm pervades the elite discourse of research' and is a 'barrier to other perspectives' (Grant and Perren, 2002:193). The limitations of the study, centred as they are on the inability to replicate and provide a reliable data collection instrument were acknowledge in that qualitative research interpretation does not have the same explanatory power of a statistical modelling approach to research. What this approach does provide, however, is a range of benefits that outweigh the biases that are inherent in it. Participants might not be able to articulate the constructive process (Coyle, 2000) but the constructive potential of discourses which are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' can get around the fundamental problem of articulation in relation to language (Foucault, 1972:49). The small scale study employed used a small but highly relevant sample. This meant that rather than looking for saturation of responses which a standard qualitative research might do I went for the culturally relevant. The subjectivist strategy employed in an interpretivist fashion (Rowlands, 2005) meant building a number of discourses in a particular context that can be seen as a satisfactory sample (Crotty, 1998) i.e. research that arrives at rich, thick description (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The advantages of taking this particular approach are listed by Rowlands (2005:82-84, after Trauth, 2001) as: the research problem – where its nature is the most significant influence on choice of method; the researcher's theoretical lens – which refers to philosophical issues of epistemology; the degree of uncertainty surrounding the problem – and in effect not just the 'what' but the 'why' and other factors surrounding the problem.

The determinist position of structuralism where 'any system is made up of a set of oppositional categories embedded in language' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005:27) was rejected, as this would not yield the desired outcome since I was not looking for structural relationships between concepts. Nor would a poststructuralist approach be appropriate where 'language is an unstable system of referents, thus it is impossible ever to capture completely the meaning of an action, text or intention' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005:27). Meaning can only be understood in terms of the historical and cultural context with the poststructuralist trying to understand the world dissected into parts of systems, as in deconstruction, hence rejection of both the structuralist and poststructuralist approaches. The basic argument for the use of subjective means of inquiry in the study was the belief that the separation between researcher and researched is a fiction (Hunter, 2004). Meaning is attributed to social experience.

Yates (2004) links quantitative methods with positivism with a warning that this is too simplistic a way of looking at the world. However this epistemology, coupled with quantitative methods, follows the usual understanding of the natural science approach (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002, Knox, 2004, Ticehurst and Veal, 2000). The reasoning in this study was to accept the researcher's interpretation in view of the transparency offered and not the researcher's intuition alone. Here the key is the inclusion of reflexivity with steps and manoeuvres taken to influence the research situation in terms of validity control.

Meaning is constructed and continually adjusted over time (Crotty, 1998). In the study, I as the researcher took a place at the table in the socially constructed arena (the interview) with the participants and through a qualitative, subjective, and social constructive approach I encountered a more rounded version of them. For Lindgren and Packendorff (2009:34-35), entrepreneurship is socially constructed and is an organic not mechanistic process involving original richness and ambiguity as opposed to a narrow set of variables in a strategic analysis reality. Through a social constructivist approach I was interested in social arenas, perceptions of phenomena and marketing sense-making involving shared artefacts. In the study I used preceding talk, not just quotations and brief explanations, to create a sense of flow and a good view of the 'show' or proceedings. I recorded what I could see from the data within the framework of the necessary subjective judgement and interpretation in order to develop a holistic understanding of the research texts and the narratives within them. A search for patterns of similarities across participants' research texts was undertaken. I, as researcher, needed to distinguish between participants' responses and what I derived from the situation as an observer. For Lett (2006:3) 'defining emics and etics in epistemological terms provides a reliable means of making that distinction'. Thus, I used an emic perspective to focus on intrinsic issues that are meaningful to participants who are judges of validity and an etic perspective to focus on extrinsic concepts and categories that have meaning for me as observer where I am the judge (Lett, 2006:3).

Social data, interpretive repertoires and discourses

From the philosophical stance taken there is not one truth but many truths based on personal experiences (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) and the existence of multiple realities (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Personal experiences of researchers lead to a particular position with respect to the context so that it is the researcher's individual, subjective view that matters. The research sought to highlight shared meanings of individuals in socially constructed arenas (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Such socially constructed realities provide the opportunity for the discourse analyst to interpret meaning (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 1993). Discourse is often contained within naturally occurring talk and is social practice. For example discourses may be used to resist social and political structures. Through the construction of identity marketers can interpret, categorise and construct social experience (van Dijk, 1997).

Organisations are arenas of social interaction socially constructed by people, language and labelling (Crotty, 1998) and in the study I attempted to understand behaviour by putting myself in the same frame of reference as the participant. A way of seeing this approach, in simple terms, is to assume that the researcher is looking through a restaurant or pub window and seeing the diners or drinkers inside. The researcher may

know who they are but not know how they view the world. The only way to get that view is to enter and to set up some form of social intercourse. Qualitative research helps to focus on actual practice in situ and in this sense there is an analytically defined perspective where social interaction takes place (Silverman, 2000). Of course, qualitative research can be used in positivistic studies and can be used to predict things (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009:32).

The form of Discourse Analysis employed in the study supported the themes that emerge from the research texts created. In the study, qualitative research was used to produce research texts from the semi-structured interview transcripts, which in turn eventually help provide the themes and discourses. There was no search for true/false statements; the quest was to discover important categories and to apply them within the chosen context. In a sense these are 'social facts' (Atkinson and Coffey, 1997:47) that are socially organised within narratives. These can become everyday narratives, autobiography or biography and beyond biography, labelled research texts in the study.

The reflexive self as researcher and as part of that which is researched

Knox (2004) points out that a non-positivist approach should strive for transparency to show what led to a particular understanding and reflexivity to show why the research method was used in the particular setting. The study took on board value preferences and commitments of participants and the researcher and it was understood that the latter would have affinity with data regarding sources, people and theories. Reflexivity helped the approach taken as it is a critical appraisal of one's own practice and involves participation and dialogue (Johnson and Duberley, 2003). It is a necessary feature of qualitative research where it 'is woven into the text' as acknowledgement of the researcher's presence and influence on the interview (Hackley, 1998:129). Reflexivity has been called 'a hallmark of excellent qualitative research' (Sandelowski and Borroso, 2002:222) and is said to facilitate the meeting of the researcher's 'intellectual responsibility' (Johnson and Duberley, 2003:1280). My move to an interpretive approach was driven, in part, by my desire to recognise myself as a subjective individual. The creation and analysis of particular socially constructed arenas was central to a study concerned, as it was, with everyday life in a particular context (Fisher 2004). Part of the study's goal was to understand the multiplicity of meaning in such a context (Elliot, 1996). Meaning is upheld and sustained through interviews reflecting the socially organised and personally valued self where the object 'cannot be understood independent of the researcher and is therefore, and dialectically so, tied up with him/her' i.e. meaning is constituted within a social process and a reflexive understanding of how meaning is constituted helps the lack of ideological neutrality (Roth and Breuer, 2003:4). Reflexivity should add value as a critical opposite of universalism and objectivism (Bryans, Mavin and Waring, 2002). Some of the issues dealt with via reflexivity in the study were social and political aspects of myself and the participants as actors, the relationship between us (Pels, 2000, Adkins, 2002), and issues around the inclusion or exclusion of certain data (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

Textual analysis and the Discourse Analysis framework

During the data analysis I was seeking recurrent patterns in the repertoires as the

pointer toward realities and noted the importance of the possible consequences of different repertoires and relationships between them (Bryans, Mavin and Waring, 2002). The study followed the advice of Silverman (2000) who suggests that textual analysis should have a clear analytical approach and deeper analysis beyond mere simple coding of responses. Diversity and contradiction were therefore expected. The themes that emerged were essentially based on similarities and differences of experience and interpretation of living with marketing that was either implicitly or explicitly stated (or both). I actively sought the best expressions that would relate to key points in the literature. This allowed discourses to emerge from the soup that might normally be banter. Discourse Analysis was used as a close study of talk where meaning was being socially constructed (Berger and Luckman, 1967). It was also clear that reality too is socially constructed but also ‘maintained, adjusted and changed over time’ (Wood, 1982:75). The interviews were conducted in confidential locations and digitally, audio recorded with notes made to have a record of the exchanges and any unusual non-audio occurrences to enhance the data such as body language.

At first it was thought that the texts would be analysed using the devices of timed pauses or gaps between words. I realised that the pauses could have some small meaning in my situation but that the actual timing of these pauses was of no benefit to the analysis. Realities are shaped by discursive practices and interactions (Grant, Keenoy and Osrick, 1998), discourses framing the sense of ‘that which we are’ (Mumby and Chair, 1997:181). The texts, similar to what Czarniawska (1994) calls ‘new collage’, were analysed by looking for: emphasis placed on words, for example *PLEASE* (louder); inhalation representing a sigh; on part of a word, for example *Always* (highlight); emphasis on words by stretching, for example *p l e a s e* (importance); and interruptions. The interviews were rich in non-verbal language and actions. The actions such as a sigh, the thumping of a table or laughter potentially held important clues to meaning and these (and pauses) were used where appropriate and relevant to the analysis. This avoided the inclusion of items that would clutter the analysis. This was necessary given that the 14 interviews yielded more than 200,000 words in the transcripts alone. The potential to add to a transcript was provided to allow the participant to partially take back ownership and have an active voice (Acker, Barry and Esseveld, 1991) and is allowed to connect to ideas that are additional to the original questioning (Johnson, 1999). The research texts were therefore created from a range of sources.

Nature of the participants and how the data was collected

Data was acquired through attempting to understand behaviour by putting myself in the same frame of reference as fourteen purposefully chosen SME managers and managers and trainers in enterprise and development agencies operating in the North East of England. I secured the interviews through personal contact and recommendation. The interview, which allowed both a degree of openness yet provided structure, was a guided conversation that defined structure and provided freedom of narrative (Mavin, 2001) and each narrative was co-produced by me and each participant (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). I as researcher structured and ordered the interview guide. This necessarily meant that I consciously included and excluded certain things and allowed the interview guide to mutate and change. In practice I led the interview yet allowed the participant to do the talking and helped shape the

interview within an organic framework that I controlled but where the participant had a voice. I began the dialogue in an open-ended manner (Thompson and Haytko, 1997), making sure the interviews were not abstractions but related to participant experiences. Probes informed by the research context, literature and experience were used. Participants were allowed to articulate the network of meanings that constitutes personal understanding of SME marketing phenomena, discourses and influences. This tool allowed me to share the world of others for a while. I was not seeking reliability so I knew the interview would be different each time.

Results and discussion - from narrative to themes and discourses

In the study, the research question involved the assumption that marketing as shaped over time by large corporations offers an inappropriate set of models and frameworks to many other contexts and in particular that of the SME owner-manager. The key research question was how SME and support agency participants 'see' marketing and what impact this might have on the provision of education, training and development in the SME context. This question was guided by my own experiences as well as ideas from the literature.

The aim of this paper is to provide an insight into methodological diversity developed through the study that involved the collection of data using a social constructivist approach and the application of Discourse Analysis. The goal was to uncover clearer, deeper meaning in a study where nine themes from interpreted meanings emerged through the employment of dialectical tracking, that is, discursive thematic interpretation from the texts that involve, among other things, salient conflicts, paradoxes, and strategies of resolution. The nine themes are:

Theme 1 – SME marketing is an acceptable notion

Theme 2 – Marketing is much more than the 4Ps

Theme 3 – SME marketing education, training and development has 3 stakeholders with differing needs

Theme 4 – Basic functional and technical skills are not enough

Theme 5 – The SME marketing curriculum needs horses for courses

Theme 6 – SME marketing is infused with relational perspectives

Theme 7 – Marketing is about people not a science, art or postmodern debate

Theme 8 – There are many interpretations of education, training and development in SME-land

Theme 9 – Education, training and development can be delivered but there are many and changing ways of delivery

Themes 1, 2, 6 and 7 relate directly to marketing and management (of the business and of people). The other themes related to aspects of education, training and development. Each theme contains a number of discourses. For example theme 6 includes the discourse 'marketing is networking'. In the study, insights were sought as to what the participants saw and what they expressed in narrative. This can be illustrated by the expressed belief that SMEs have to have relationships with others as part of marketing practice. I was looking for beliefs and meanings and therefore what metaphors, metonyms or concepts are used to describe behaviours and how participants use context meanings to subvert dominant or orthodox meanings and values in terms of wider society. Thus, expressions that emphasise, for example,

practicality, industriousness, or conservatism were evident and tied in with aspects of everyday life and the social dynamics that drive it. The narrative might glamorise or trivialise, display a critical stance toward some issue, or have familial influence. I adapted, combined, or transformed to arrive at shared themes that fitted the participants' circumstances. This might have included their social setting, their sense of history, beliefs, interests, aspirations, goals but also interpretations that localise social distinctions, boundaries, archetypes, folk theories of managing or of motivation or for managing interpersonal dynamics within broader social dynamics. Such 'things' of course will mutate and continually renew, be defended, resisted, and recreated, modified, challenged, or altered in some way.

There is therefore an ongoing social dialogue with social consequences. This includes myriad phenomena such as folk theories of how best to promote products and the business and of brand development possibilities. There are many other non-marketing topics such as self-worth, the pursuit of freedom and individuality, the dynamics of social relationships, gender roles and sexuality, taste and decency standards in relation to values and beliefs, or notions of equality in the workplace and wider society. The tensions and paradoxes that result from the participants as individuals and as members of this particular social arena and indeed wider society give rise to individual autonomy and conformity sensitivities. Participants therefore used countervailing meanings of SME marketing, business and learning discourse to address a series of tensions and paradoxes between themselves and sources of social pressure or prescription in their working and everyday lives. At the centre of this is a range of conformity pressures and expectations.

The themes are of equal importance and each theme has key discourses within it. I patterned the presentation in a way similar to swinging on a vine (after Chenail, 1995) and aimed for simplicity so as not to drown myself or the reader in the vast sea of data. I, as researcher, actively sought and found voices of participants in a particular place or setting (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). The situational validity in this process was still intact since I returned to the place where data once lived; in that reality where participants are 'round not flat' (Chenail 1995:3). I came to the interview with an understanding and predisposition. As expected, participants had views that contradicted the orthodox marketing norm or expectation. In this way, I was part of the socially constructed reality and sought to explain and understand and then interpret the outcome that is a biography as part of the social life of the participants. It is argued here that discourse lies at the centre of this, where external influences such as a training workshop help establish discourses and discursive practices. The use of a semi-structured interview provided transcripts that, through the addition of other things such as observations noted during the interviews, became research texts that were then analysed using a Discourse Analysis lens allowing themes and discourses to emerge from the study.

I did not seek to emancipate or change things but I established a position by placing myself in the same frame of reference as participants. Figure 1 illustrates how discourse lies at the centre of understanding SME marketing and implications for education, training and development.

The means – the SSI Discourse Analysis

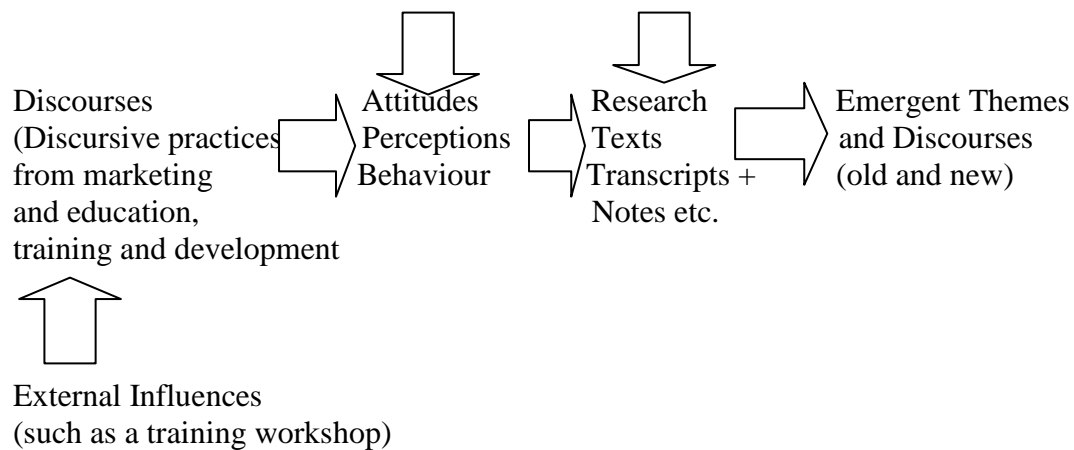


Figure 1. Discourse at the centre of understanding SME marketing and implications for education, training and development. Constructed by the author (Copley, 2009).

Concluding remarks and future research

Concluding remarks

The study highlighted the need to include critical marketing issues when considering the nature of SME marketing, which challenges accepted notions of orthodox and relational SME marketing. This resulted in the construction of a schema for SME marketing that went beyond the orthodox and relational marketing paradigms as illustrated in figure 2 below:

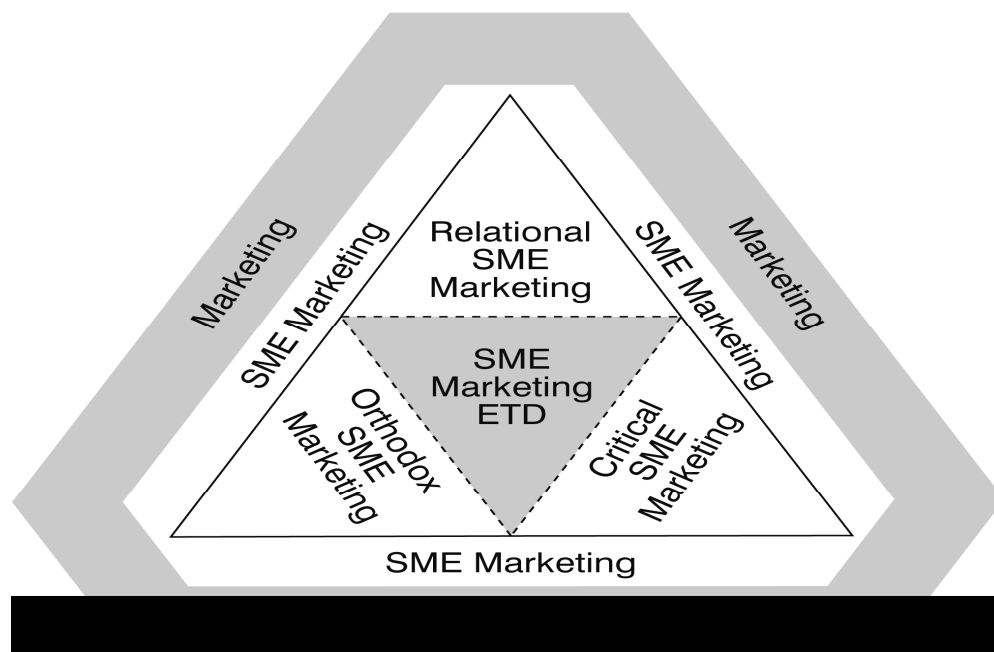


Figure 2. The Relational, Orthodox and Critical SME marketing schema as part of marketing. Source: Constructed by the author (Copley, 2008).

This paper is part of the discussion that surrounds the question as to what the nature of SME marketing is which has not been adequately dealt with through the use of positivist or functionalist approaches. Taking a social constructivist approach led to a qualitative research study that examined the data generated through a Discourse Analysis lens. The study provided a contribution by suggesting that the approach taken changes the picture somewhat of the nature of SME marketing by adding to the theoretical perspective where social life is understood to be a combination of orthodox, relational and critical perspectives, where the data in the study are understood as social enactments.

This paper's contribution lies in the explanation of the research design chosen within the social constructivist approach to researching SME marketing. This has its limitations and biases as well as its benefits where, it has been argued in this paper, the benefits outweigh the biases and limitations. The potential for this kind of approach lies in its transferability to other contexts, including commercial marketing research contexts, especially when the researcher is looking for other kinds of data that would make a picture complete. The alternatives are many and varied, including the range of designs that are common in both qualitative, quantitative and mixed method research but the use of a social constructivism should at least be considered either as a stand-alone approach or part of a mix methods study.

Implications for further publications and research

This article is part of my intended dissemination of outputs from the study and is part of my intention to rethink small business research. On the broadest level, the relational, orthodox and critical SME marketing schema outlined above is transportable so that instead of the education, training and development (the base plane) SME context, the schema can be applied to many other contexts. One example would be arts marketing. Other forms of critical study, such as feminism or radical ecology could be added. There could therefore be more than the four planes. This would change the shape of the object and increase the number of planes and interfaces. In the study there are the three planes from which avenues of further research stem. There are also the interfaces of the three planes and the point at which all three meet where further research is a possibility. For example:

- On the relational SME marketing plane, people, behaviour and managing relationships is highlighted where people are viewed differently in relationships and behaviour is more complex than in big companies, for example in the SME there is more multi-tasking and 'wearing of many hats'.
- On the orthodox SME marketing plane, the marketing mix, or 4Ps, within the SMEs perspective, are obvious and in the background not the foreground. The basic model might be useful for training for start-up situations (but not growth businesses) to teach basic marketing. Ps extensions are meaningless and even absurd, especially in SME marketing. The use of these devices benefits trainers not SMEs.

- On the critical SME marketing plane, with people in SMEs, behaviour is more cross-functional than in bigger companies and this is linked to a spectrum of choice between business growth and lifestyle choice decisions. There is a greater chance that SMEs are people-centred and not 'psychic prisons' that are much more likely to exist in big organisations.
- On the relational/orthodox interface, SMEs can achieve sustainable competitive advantage from partnerships and alliances.
- On the orthodox/critical interface the SME should consider critical ideas around business based on ethics and marketing practices. People (but not in a fifth P kind of way) coupled with innovation and opportunity (and not 4Ps-type approaches), are the transforming metaphor that helps SMEs develop and grow.
- On the critical/relational interface, Small firms grow organically where there is a symbiosis between business and networking. People and relationships, not one-off sales, are important to SMEs.
- On the relational, orthodox and critical interface, an integrated holistic approach to relationship marketing that can help join critical marketing and orthodox marketing is advocated. For example, critical issues such as professionalism, the ethical nature of the business and relationships, some form of alliance and impact on reputation are factors that bring together the three paradigms.
- On the SME marketing ETD context base plane, there is a dependency on a small number of manager competencies, in comparison with larger organisations. Competence-based accreditation such as NVQs is not attractive to SMEs yet MTD is required for survival. SME managers, if they are to look at qualifications at all, would prefer something like an MBA not NVQs. Different skills exist. Some are termed ordinary or administrative and others entrepreneurial and managerial. There is a need for SMEs to develop higher order skills that allow for innovation and creativity. SMEs need to be adaptive to graft different skills together.

In addition to these kinds of areas, other data collection methods such as the unstructured interview could be considered. It is also worth noting that management paradigms and culture were considered to be included in the literature review of the study but this was eventually rejected, not because of irrelevancy but because although marketing orthodoxy is linked to the American Management Paradigm and relationship marketing to the European Management Paradigm, it was felt that to include this would be too broad a sweep. It is believed though that SME marketing and education, training and development within these cultural models are worthy of research and study. Some form of longitudinal study in the SME marketing context might reveal aspects of change and a linguistic approach using Critical Discourse Analysis of research texts of SME and support agency participants would be a very fruitful direction. It was beyond the scope of the study to explore further learning styles in relation to experiential learning and it is believed that in the SME marketing context this is a fertile area for further research. Finally, deeper comparative study

could be made between support agency and SME participant perspectives and between SMEs and larger enterprises.

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